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Chicago gives welcome consent

In a welcome reversal of a position taken several months ago, the Byrne administration has agreed to enter into a consent decree restraining Chicago police and other city employees from unwarranted political spying.

Years ago, the Alliance to End Repression, the American Civil Liberties Union, and others brought class action suits occasioned by activities of the now defunct and little lamented Chicago "Red Squad" and the FBI and CIA. (Similar suits were brought in New York and other cities.) Prolonged negotiations resulted in drafting consent decrees acceptable to all concerned, including attorneys for the City of Chicago, until some influential person at City Hall objected. For a time it looked as if City Hall was going to try to defend the indefensible by insisting on a trial, an expensive and embarrassing prospect. But now the city is ready to join in a consent decree instead.

The essence of the Chicago consent decree is that the FBI, the CIA, and the City of Chicago all

agree not to harass entirely law-abiding groups and persons by subjecting them to surveillance, infiltration, break-ins, etc. This sort of activity in the past had negligible or negative effects. Renouncing it is no handicap to the Police Department, no danger to the public safety. Peter Fitzpatrick, special assistant corporation counsel in the matter, says, "This is a very good settlement and it won't hobble the police. Police Supt. Brzezczek went over it line by line and he's got no problem with it." No Chicago official is — or should be — on record as wanting to see in the future the kind of actions the consent decree renounces.

To take effect, the consent decree must be approved by Judge Susan Getzendanner. She has already given preliminary approval to the settlement with the FBI and CIA, and is confidently expected to approve the proposed settlement between the plaintiffs and Chicago. Though some individual damage suits are still pending, one kind of foolishness is finally being consigned to history.